Equity and Human Relations Advisory Committee

Report on Diversity Awareness Projects
EHRAC Meeting 1/27/26

Ad Hoc Subcommittee Members: Haifaa Moammar, Rebecca Rona, Ifunanyan Nweke, Carlos Valverde

The Diversity Awareness Ad Hoc Subcommittee seeks to create a webpage for the City website which highlights and educates visitors about culturally significant locations in Culver City. The webpage would feature the following:

1. **The Kunisawa family** and **farm**, located on the land where Farragut Elementary, Culver City Middle School and Culver City High School currently stand;
2. **Sebastian's Cotton Club,** with a rich musical history that included performances by prominent African American artists
3. **Pacific Electric Labor Camp,** which was located in the area of the Warner Media building, where countless Latinos resided for decades;
4. **The Gabrielino Tongva Indians of California** lived and worked throughout the area, their ancestral land. The banks of Guashna, now known as Ballona Creek, where these people lived and worked for millennia. Member Rona has spoken to a local expert, and will provide more information.

The 'Diversity Awareness' webpage would be created exactly like the https://www.culvercity.org/Explore/Arts-Culture page, located under the "Explore" "Arts & Culture"page of the City website.

The ad hoc subcommittee will continue to verify historical; information regarding the microsite narratives with the CC Historian, as well as other members of the community who may offer feedback on each of these drafts.

UPDATE

One of the four articles, PE Camp, is mostly completed and included in this report. The article on Sebastian's Cotton Club is in draft form and is also included in this report. Both are still being edited. The articles on the Gabrielino and Kunisawa Farm are in process and scheduled to be completed by April or sooner.

The Pacific Electric Labor Camp in Culver City

The Pacific Electric Labor Camp in Culver City was located south of the Ivy Substation, in an area that today includes the Metro Expo Station and Howard Industries. Although no visible traces of the camp remain, it once played an important role in the city's early history.

The labor camp was part of the Pacific Electric Railway system, a vast network of railways throughout Los Angeles begun by Henry R. Huntington in 1901. Operating and maintaining this expanding system required large numbers of unskilled laborers. In the early twentieth century, railroad workers came from diverse backgrounds, including Chinese, European, African American, and Mexican communities. Mexican workers, known as *traqueros*, laid more than half of the railroad tracks in the western United States (Garcialazo 1).

The term *traqueros* refers to Mexican and Mexican American railroad workers who helped build and expand the U.S. railroad system in the Southwest from the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s. The word comes from an Anglicized Spanish term related to "track," reflecting their work as track layers and maintenance workers.

To build and maintain his railways and resorts, Huntington actively recruited Mexican immigrants, whom he viewed as dependable and low-cost laborers. The Pacific Electric Railway Company (PERC) provided housing for many of these workers at no cost, placing them in labor camps throughout Southern California. These included camps in Culver City, South Pasadena, and near the San Gabriel Mountains. While the company promoted an image of caring for its workers, many camps consisted of overcrowded section houses or converted boxcars with limited sanitation and harsh living conditions.

PERC later began allowing workers' families to live in the camps after realizing that employees were more motivated when their families were nearby. The company maintained a strongly paternalistic attitude toward the *traqueros*. For example, one PERC newsletter describes efforts to teach *traquero* wives basic hygiene and gardening. At the same time, *traqueros* were segregated from white workers by the company.

Daily life in the camps reveals the strong culture and sense of community that existed among Culver City's *traquero* families. The camps were home to both single workers and families with children. Men and women together built lives centered on work, family, and shared responsibility.

A central feature of camp life was the social network formed through baptism and the tradition of *compadrazgo*. Families selected close friends to serve as godparents (*compadres*) to their children. These relationships carried significant responsibility and were often regarded as equal to family ties. Through these bonds, families supported one another by sharing food, water, childcare, and household labor.

Although Mexican women rarely worked directly for the railroad, many supported their families through what is known as an "informal economy." They earned income by doing laundry,

sewing, preparing and selling food, selling small items door to door, or working as maids in nearby households. These efforts were essential to family survival and community stability.

The existence of the Culver City labor camp came to light in 2021, when resident Amanda Chacon shared a birth certificate with the Culver City Historical Foundation showing that her father, Efren Rumaldo Heredia, also known as “Fred,” was born at the camp. Based on her father’s memories, Chacon and her aunts, Rosie Soto and Irma Ramos, later gave an interview to the Culver City Historical Society describing life in the camp.

According to their account, the camp included a large, U-shaped, barracks-style building, along with shared outdoor bathrooms and showers. Many labor camps also had gardens where residents grew food. Chacon’s great-grandparents arrived from Mexico around 1917 and were assigned a small two-room living space, where they built a simple kitchen. Because there was no indoor plumbing, residents obtained water from outdoor tanks or wells. As the family grew, they were given additional space to accommodate more relatives. Ultimately, four generations of the Heredia family lived at the Pacific Electric Camp from approximately 1917 through 1953.

The exact address of the camp has not been confirmed. However, Chacon and her relatives recall that it was located on the block bounded by Washington Boulevard, Robertson Boulevard, Venice Boulevard, and National Boulevard—an area that is now home to Howard Industries.

Chacon’s aunt Irma recalled that as a child she felt embarrassed giving the camp’s address at school because, unlike her classmates at St. Augustine, her address was a P.O. Box. When she explained this to her brother Fred, he suggested using the address of a nearby car lot and adding “½” to it. This small detail reflects both the informal nature of the camp and the social challenges faced by its residents.

Although the Pacific Electric Labor Camp in Culver City has long since disappeared, its history remains an important part of the city’s past. The stories of the *traquero* workers and their families highlight the contributions, resilience, and community bonds that helped shape Culver City in its early years. Preserving and sharing this history ensures that their experiences are remembered and recognized as part of the city’s shared heritage.

REFERENCES: Garcialazgo (will be updated)

(Revised 1/15/26)

Frank Sebastian's Sebastian Cotton Club [DRAFT]

6508 Washington Blvd, Culver City, California

Opened: 1926 | Closed: 1938

Introduction

Frank Sebastian's Cotton Club was a jazz venue and a symbol of the roaring Jazz Age on the West Coast. The club is famous for its star-studded lineup, glamorous ambiance, and ties to Hollywood. It also reflected its era's racial and social dynamics. Frank Sebastian provided the platform, but the performers made the club what it was. This report examines Sebastian's motivations, the performers' successes and struggles, the club's large popularity, and the reasons behind its closure. The story of the Cotton Club is one of artistic, unique talent, cultural vitality, and the changing dynamics of society.

Why did Frank Sebastian start the Cotton Club?

Frank Sebastian was a businessman with a vision. In 1926, he opened the Cotton Club to bring the energy of Harlem's nightlife to Hollywood, the flourishing entertainment capital.

He understood jazz, a revolutionary music that captivated audiences nationwide and worldwide. He envisioned his club as a haven where people could indulge in music, dance, and entertainment away from the constraints of Prohibition-era restrictions. Located near Culver City film studios, he aimed to attract a clientele that wanted luxury, exclusivity, and a break from the mundane.

The Performers

Frank Sebastian owed much of his club's success to African American talents. They entertained and overcame the challenges of their Jim Crow era to create and perform their art of music and dance. That resilience in adversity made the Cotton Club a cultural phenomenon and a beacon of jazz and entertainment, inspiring future generations.

Notable Performers and Their Stories

Louis Armstrong: The jazz pioneer who performed a three-month residency in 1932, Armstrong captivated audiences with his revolutionary trumpet style and charismatic stage presence. His performances at the club brought national attention to West Coast jazz. Listen to Louis Armstrong & His Sebastian New Cotton Club Orchestra—"The Peanut Vendor."

Lionel Hampton: Known as the world's fastest drummer, Hampton started performing at the Cotton Club at just 18 years old. His groundbreaking work on the vibraphone made him a standout figure in jazz. Watch Lionel Hampton perform "I'm a Ding Dong Daddy."

Valaida Snow: Dubbed "Little Louis," this multi-talented trumpeter and singer brought charisma and musical brilliance to the stage.

Miss Snow's ability to command the audience made her an icon and a favorite among the audience. Sadly, there are not many recordings of her performances.

Les Hite: As a skilled bandleader, Hite assembled some of the finest musicians and led the club's orchestra, ensuring the highest quality of each performance.

Aurora Greeley: A vocalist known for her emotional depth and connection with the audience, she became a beloved figure at the Sebastian Cotton Club.

Dizzy Gillespie: It is unclear if Mr. Gillespie brought his full band to the Cotton Club since he was primarily associated with bands led by Cab Calloway and Earl Hines during the late 1930s. However, his unique, innovative bebop style influenced music then and for the future.

Fats Waller: The comedic genius and jazz legend, Waller's much-loved energy and piano skills made every performance memorable. Watch Fats Waller perform "Ain't Misbehavin'."

T-Bone Walker: One of the pioneers of electric blues, Walker's guitar performances added a unique flavor to the club's offerings.

Cab Calloway: Known and highly respected by his peers and the public for his larger-than-life personality and for pushing for dark-skinned dancers, Calloway's performances were electrifying and progressive.

While performing on stage "Minnie the Moocher," a mistake led him to forget the lyrics and improvise with syllables like "hi-de-hi-de-hi-de-ho." This improvisation became the song's most iconic feature. It demonstrated Calloway's charismatic ability to turn a mistake into a success.

Duke Ellington: The famous one-of-a-kind jazz composer and bandleader of all time, Mr. Ellington's time at the Cotton Club elevated it to legendary status.

Earl Hines Orchestra: Known as "Fatha," Hines brought his orchestra to the club, mesmerizing audiences with innovative piano and big band arrangements.

Bill "Bojangles" Robinson: The celebrated tap dancer, Robinson's elegant and rhythmic performances brought a unique style and sophistication to the Cotton Club.

The Berry Brothers: Acclaimed tap dancers whose fast-paced routines brought excitement and variety to the shows.

The Sebastian Cotton Club's legacy is due to the performers and their talent. Their resilience impacted the music and entertainment world. Because of them, music lovers could listen to and enjoy jazz.

Other Jazz Venues in Los Angeles

Jazz clubs along Central Avenue played an essential role in the city's jazz scene. The refuge from racism for the Black Angelenos.

The Dunbar Hotel was a hub of African American culture in Los Angeles. It hosted legendary jam sessions and performances by influential musicians, such as Duke Ellington and Count Basie.

Club Alabam: The West Coast counterpart to Harlem's Cotton Club, Club Alabam was known for its luxury atmosphere and highly talented and famous entertainers.

The Downbeat Club, once the go-to spot for emerging jazz musicians, has become a place for jazz lovers to frequent.

The Plantation Club: This historic venue was home to the rising stars of the jazz and blues scenes, solidifying Los Angeles' reputation as a jazz hub.

In addition to the Sebastian Cotton Club, these venues created a thriving jazz culture in Los Angeles that resonated far beyond city limits. Together, they fostered an environment where musicians could innovate and audiences could experience jazz's transformative power. However, SCC clients in Culver City were white since Culver City was a sundown town. The Central Avenue Clubs in Los Angeles catered to Black Angelenos, a refuge from the racism surrounding them, where they could listen, enjoy, and showcase their jazz music talent.

Factors that had the Cotton Club Close

The closure of Frank Sebastian's Cotton Club in 1938 marked the end of an era. While its lights dimmed, it declined due to social and economic shifts.

The Great Depression and its economic concerns:

The financial downfall of the 1930s left many clients unable to afford to attend clubs for entertainment.

Competition: New clubs in Los Angeles, with new talents that took away the Cotton Club's audience.

End of Prohibition: The repeal of Prohibition in 1933 removed the mystique of speakeasies, lessening the club's allure.

Changing Tastes: Swing music began dominating the scene, and the Cotton Club may have struggled to keep pace with this shift in audience preference.

Internal and Legal Pressures

Law Enforcement Scrutiny: The club's alleged involvement in gambling and illicit liquor eventually drew attention from authorities, complicating its operations.

Operational Challenges: Maintaining a high-profile venue with top-tier talent proved financially unsustainable as profits shrank.

A Legacy of Light and Shadow

Frank Sebastian's Cotton Club was more than a nightclub—it was a cultural phenomenon that was part of Los Angeles clubs that shaped the West Coast jazz scene and provided a stage for some of the most excellent musicians of the 20th century. Yet, it was also a reflection of its time, highlighting both the vibrancy of the Jazz Age and the systemic inequalities that persisted in entertainment and society.

Through their extraordinary talents and resilience, the performers were the true heroes of the Sebastian Cotton Club. They turned a venue into a legend and left a legacy that continues to inspire. The Cotton Club reminds us of the power of art to transcend barriers and the enduring impact of those who create it.

Resources and References

Resources and References

1. Calisphere

o Item about Frank Sebastian and his club's history: Calisphere.org

2. The Hideho Blog

o Detailed posts on performers and events at the Cotton Club, including mentions of Valaida Snow and Mae Diggs: The Hideho Blog

3. Syncopated Times

o Articles covering Louis Armstrong’s tenure at the Cotton Club: SyncopatedTimes.com

4. Black Past

o Historical overview of Sebastian’s Cotton Club and its cultural significance: BlackPast.org

5. Louis Armstrong House Museum